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SUBJECT: AMBASSADOR HILL'S INTRODUCTORY MEETING WITH MASOUD BARZANI

Classified By: Acting PolCouns John Fox; reason 1.4.(b) AND (d)

¶1. (C) SUMMARY. In a May 2 meeting with KRG President Barzani in Erbil, Ambassador urged Barzani to reach out to PM Maliki on issues that divide them. He assured Barzani the U.S. is committed to supporting Iraqi leaders in what may be a long and sometimes difficult political process. Barzani admitted UNAMI's report on the disputed internal boundaries (DIBs) "provides something for discussion." Kurdish officials are over-optimistic that Arabs in Kirkuk will return to their places of origin and that Turkmen will ultimately support Kirkuk joining the Kurdistan Region (KR), but acknowledged that "Kurdization" is not an appropriate response to past Arabization. Barzani pledged to protect minority rights in the KR, but said the Kurds might reconsider power-sharing if it is not reciprocated by Sunni Arab leaders in Ninewa. Barzani remains anxious about potential Peshmerga clashes with the Iraqi Army, Iranian meddling, and the power of the central government. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (C) Ambassador Hill traveled to Erbil on May 2 for an introductory meeting with Kurdish Regional Government (KRG) President Masoud Barzani at the Presidential compound in Salahudin. With Barzani were Kurdish parliamentary speaker Adnan Mufti, Senior Advisor Rosch Shaweys, chief of staff Fuad Hussein, and KRG Foreign Affairs Director Falah Bakir. The Ambassador was accompanied by PMIN Robert Ford, PRT Erbil chief Lucy Tamlyn, senior advisor Brett McGurk, military advisor COL Ron Mozzillo, and Poloff Joe Cassidy.

U.S.-Kurdish relations

¶3. (C) Barzani responded warmly to the Ambassador's introductory words about the history of U.S.-Kurdish cooperation. He said he was quite pleased with his April 7 meeting with President Obama. Barzani recounted recent Kurdish history and warned of attempts by Prime Minister Maliki to accrue power, but also pledged that "despite oppression of the Kurds, we will cooperate with other groups to build Iraq." Ambassador assured Barzani the U.S. is committed to supporting political accommodation in Iraq and that we understand resolution of outstanding political issues may not happen soon and may not be easy. He told Barzani that negotiators don't get to choose with whom they negotiate, they must engage those with whom they have differences. Barzani responded with the Iraq saying, "You don't get to choose your brothers, only your friends," and said America is a friend.

Preparing KRG response to UNAMI Reports

¶4. (C) Barzani said the KRG has established a "committee of

experts" to review the draft UNAMI reports on the disputed internal boundaries (DIBs) issues and prepare the KRG response. His initial impression, he said, is that the reports "show some unfairness to the Kurds" but "provide something for discussion." Ambassador said we would like to see progress soon, as the passage of time will not make resolution easier. Barzani agreed. (Hussein told PolOff Cassidy in a side conversation that the KRG has sub-committees doing fact-checking and preparing the KRG's policy response, which would be ready in the next several days.)

Territorial Claims and Demography in Kirkuk

¶5. (C) Speaker Mufti argued that Kirkuk was historically Kurdish and said that Ottoman maps support this. He acknowledged that other groups, too, have rights that must be Qacknowledged that other groups, too, have rights that must be respected, and said the Kurds do not seek to commit "Kurdization" in response to Saddam-era Arabization. He pledged the KRG would "prevent Kurdish fundamentalists from expelling Arabs" from mixed areas. Mufti said a majority of Kirkuk's Turkmen community would choose to join the Kurdish Region in a referendum and the majority of Arabs sent to Kirkuk -- mostly Shi'a -- would accept compensation under the Article 140 process and return to their original areas. (Comment: Mufti is over-optimistic in both contentions, we believe. End comment.)

Minority Rights in Kurdish Region

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¶6. (C) Mufti said the process of drafting the KRG constitution is nearing completion and would offer protections of minority rights greater than those found in the Iraqi constitution. Barzani explained the KRG would set aside government positions for minority groups in areas incorporated into the KRG, Turkmen and Arabs in particular. He then warned more darkly that the Kurds might reconsider if the new (Sunni Arab) provincial authorities in Ninewa did not share power with local Kurdish leaders.

Risk of military clashes

¶7. (C) Barzani warned the Ambassador that Baghdad intends to change facts on the ground in the disputed areas by deploying Iraqi Army units into Peshmerga-controlled areas (he cited the 12th IA division in Kirkuk as the foremost threat). The situation in Mosul is worrying, he said, because Maliki and former Ba'athists were making common cause on an anti-Kurd platform.

Regional relations

¶8. (C) Barzani expressed gratitude for U.S. sacrifices in Iraq and noted that a defeat in Iraq would have deleterious effects throughout the region. He said warmer KRG relations with Ankara arose from an evolution of Turkish positions. He cited Iran as the chief regional problem and said Iranians leaders "think they won" because U.S. military action in Afghanistan and Iraq removed two rivals of Tehran and installed allies in Baghdad.

HILL